

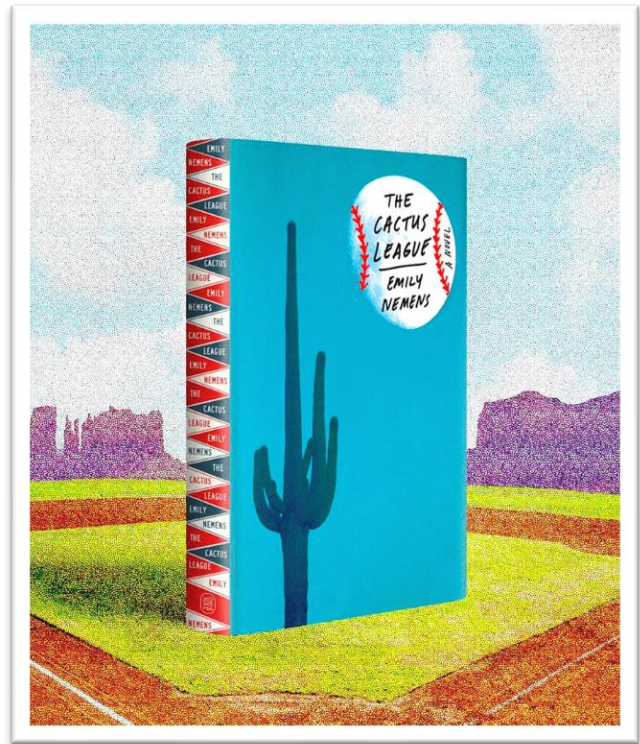
Allison's Book Corner May 2020

The Cactus League by Emily Nemens
(Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020)

Last Spring a friend called me while I was driving to ask me about my day. The sun was shining and Suzyn Waldman and John Sterling were on the radio doing the play-by-play announcing of the Yankees Game. I told him it was an absolutely perfect day. Great weather and the Yankees on the radio was all I needed. I could never have imagined that one year later instead of getting Yankees tickets for me and my father, I would be purchasing Yankees face masks with filters for us, instead.

While MLB (Major League Baseball) currently discusses possibly starting their season in late June, fans like me have to be content with watching classic games on TV or reading great books about our beloved game. I bring you the latter. Emily Nemens has written a very good novel about MLB Spring Training, an annual event that did not happen this year. I still cannot believe it.

If I have not lost you already, this novel is not so much about the game as it is about the world surrounding the game. **All sports fans can relate to that.** These sports that we love so much would be nothing without the fans, the people who work at the stadiums serving us our hot dogs and t-shirts, and last but not least, the actual player who gets out on the field or basketball court or insert any sport in the blank. Our favorite sport is a living breathing entity. There is a community around the sport that keeps that sport relevant. There are also many people, oftentimes a “posse,” behind the actual player.



This book is very well-written and the author's baseball knowledge cannot be questioned. However, I was disappointed to learn that the underside of baseball is so sordid. The similarity to the reality show *Basketball Wives* is very sad. I have not been living under a rock. We all know about steroid abuse and that Pete Rose bet on baseball games. Nemens allows us to follow All Star player Jason Goodyear to Spring Training in Arizona. The Cactus League itself is not fictional. It is a 15-team Spring Training league that plays in Arizona annually in normal times. We also see the Cactus League through the eyes of a sports agent, a batting coach, a single mother who works at the stadium and neglects her children, and a woman who is a proud "cleat chaser." I had never heard of that term before reading this book. Basically, the character Tamara has no problem dating any pro baseball player that comes her way - even a married one. Her personal Spring Training is to hunt down baseball players. This goes way beyond the starry-eyed fan hoping for a date. I will not say any more. I have to hand it to Nemens. As a woman she writes unflinchingly and in a non-judgmental way about it.

The sordid also includes drug abuse, gambling addiction, mental health issues and the list goes on. Basically, everything that affects our society is also behind the diamond on the field. If you are looking for *Field of Dreams* in this book, you will not find it. This is good old reality, folks. And sometimes reality is ugly. We are all learning that right now.

If you can handle the truth mixed in with America's Favorite Pastime, you will enjoy this book. The writing draws you right into your favorite stadium. The reader can smell the popcorn and hot dogs, hear the crowds, someone singing "put me in coach..." and the *batter-batter-batter* chant.

As I read the last line of this novel, I wanted to turn on the TV, call my Dad and watch a game. ANY sports game at this point. You owe it to yourself to get lost in these pages for awhile. The author never could have predicted what would be happening in this world when writing this book. However, as you read it, you sense that maybe she somehow knew after all.